

BOOK REVIEW

John Dewey's Great Debates—Reconstructed

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Shane Ralston, *John Dewey's Great Debates--Reconstructed*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011. 145 + ix pp. ISBN 978-1-61735-535-6. \$45.99 (pbk.), 978-1-61735-536-3. \$85.99 (hbk.)

Our embodied capacity for action and our dispositions towards goals define our perception of a situation and possible actions. Thus, situations are not constitutive of action, but they demand that we act. For Shane Ralston, the situations that call for action are historical, imagined, or projected debates involving John Dewey. When Dewey is portrayed not just as a presenter of theory, but as an actor in debates grounded in time, place, and daily life consequences, we understand his arguments in new ways. When he is called upon to act by engaging in debates that arose even long after his death, the interaction (or transaction) of philosopher and situation produces new meaning.

The non-teleological, creative conception of the relationship between actor and situation has been developed well by Hans Joas, building upon the work of George Herbert Mead, Dewey, and other pragmatists. As the actor engages with changing situations, new meanings emerge. There is thus a quasi-dialogical relationship between action and situation, which implies a creativity of action, neither pre-determined by intentionality nor pre-established by the situation.¹ Hubert Dreyfus expresses a similar idea in a passage about falling in love: "In such a creative discovery the world reveals a new order of signification which is neither simply discovered nor arbitrarily chosen."² The reconstructions of Dewey that we observe in Ralston's reconstructed debates are prime examples of what Joas calls the creativity of action. They are not merely a means to understand a pre-determined Dewey; they reveal "a new order of signification."

The debates presented cleverly demonstrate the quasi-dialogical relation between situation and actor. Instead of being simply another reading of Deweyan texts, they are an effort to bring Dewey to life, not to "maintain an immune monastic respectability" but to participate actively "in the living struggles and issues" of the times³. Of course, Dewey, as much or more than any other major philosopher, understood philosophy as active participation in life and embodied that in his own

work. Moreover, growth is a unifying concept linking many aspects of Dewey's philosophy. It seems especially fitting for Ralston to ask how Dewey's ideas themselves would grow in response to new challenges.

Dewey was a consummate debater, not as we might think today of one who excels at oral debate competitions with assigned positions to defend, but rather as someone who wrestled with important public policy issues and intellectual discussions of his times, defending positions that were deeply held, but often unpopular. He engaged with Bertrand Russell on theories of logic, with Walter Lippman on the role of expertise in public deliberations, with Kenneth Burke and with Randolph Bourne about democracy and World War I, with Jane Addams regarding violence in the context of the Pullman strike, and with many others on diverse topics.

One consequence of this wrestling with issues of the day is that Dewey's ideas are best understood not as fixed elements within an abstract system. Instead, as he saw them, they are tools for inquiry situated in the context of active struggles of the times and his own engagements as a public intellectual. Others have used reconstructed debates to examine Dewey. For example, Paul Stob reads him as engaging in a postmortem dialogue with Burke. The areas of agreement and points of contention between Burke and Dewey become both more lively and more comprehensible when presented in the context of concrete historical reality.⁴ Similarly, John Capps brings Dewey into dialogue with AIDS activists and creationists, and Michael Eldridge, the dedicatee of Ralston's book, does the same with a dispute put to the grievance committee that Dewey chaired for the New York Teacher's Union.⁵

Ralston takes the idea of debate as a medium for understanding much further. The first two debates he considers are among ones that Dewey actually had with his contemporaries, one with Leon Trotsky and the second with Robert Hutchins. Next, he considers two imagined debates with contemporary intellectuals, E. D. Hirsch and Robert Talisse. Both of these scholars have criticized Dewey's ideas long after his death; Ralston helps us to see, or reconstruct, a Deweyan response. In the latter part of the book, he considers contemporary public policy debates, one on home schooling versus public schooling and one on George W. Bush's claim that terrorists, dictators, and their supporters hate America for its freedom. For the debates involving Trotsky and Hutchins we have documentation for both Dewey and his opposition. For Hirsch and Talisse, we have only their voices, and must do a bit more work to project Dewey's rebuttal. In the final examples, we have circumstances that Dewey did not encounter, so that we must imagine more fully how his theories might respond, or evolve to respond.

In addition to the six debates that receive the full treatment, there is effectively another debate in the introduction about historical inquiry. I found this to be one of the most interesting. Dewey sees history as growing out of present conditions. Drawing from his view of logic as a theory of inquiry, he writes "We naturally remember what interests us and because it interests us. The past is recalled not

because of itself but because of what it adds to the present”⁶. C. I. Lewis and others interpreted Dewey’s view as sinking into total relativism, with each historian writing from his or her own vantage point. Ralston does a nice job of presenting this debate, and consequently, setting up the rationale for the book’s project of relating Dewey to present interests.

None of the debates are presented as simple win/lose propositions. In fact, in each case, except the last one, Ralston searches for the common ground as well as differences. He also does a good job showing weaknesses in Dewey’s position, for example, regarding Dewey’s understanding of Marxism in the Trotsky debate. As a result, the debates are presented in an engaging way, which calls the reader in to see what Dewey will do next. They fulfill the promise of showing Dewey in a manner fitting to his philosophy, and revealing more about Dewey’s ideas than we might glean from a straight reading.

However, the debate format does have some limitations. Fitting six major debates into 100 pages doesn’t leave much room for developing systems of thought or accounting for nuances in positions. In the first one (Trotsky), we need to understand Marxism and pragmatism, their contrasting views of history, the resulting thesis that they are incompatible, Dewey’s misreading of Marxism, and eventually a possible synthesis that can be applied to fair trade activism. Ralston makes a good effort to do this, but I felt the need for more elaboration on all the positions presented, perhaps another 100 pages to explore the ways in which Marxism and pragmatism overlap as well as the ways they do not, not simply going from incompatibility to synthesis.

Another concern about the format is that, despite allowing a few criticisms of Dewey, it tends to give us one position, then a response from Dewey showing how that position is wrong. Even for readers sympathetic to Dewey (or Deweyan analysis, as we should say for the later chapters), the resolution of the debate comes across as too easy, too complete. In each case, there could be more left unresolved. For example, Ralston makes the case that Hutchins over-emphasizes subject matter (the Great Books), and separates subject matter from method. He argues in that chapter that a richer vision can be found in John A. Rice’s view of the curriculum as a tool for individual growth. For Rice, as with Dewey, the classic texts were only one means of getting experience for growth. However, a good case can be made that the Great Conversation idea inherent in the Great Books approach is a dialogical method supportive of pragmatist inquiry, despite the heated disagreements between Dewey/Rice and Hutchins. Thus, method is very present, just not elaborated. Moreover, the realizations of Hutchins’s ideas in actual curricula have led them to evolve, just as Dewey’s have. One can find, as Ralston does, that Dewey’s view is ultimately more comprehensive, more balanced, more open, more coherent, and so on, yet still leave more room for questions about the role of accumulated cultural knowledge, how much shared subject matter there should be, or how subject matter and method

interact within different disciplines. Ralston does articulate five major points of convergence between Dewey and Hutchins. However, it would be in keeping with the book's premise of a living Dewey to ask less for a comfortable resolution and more for questions for further inquiry.

Attempting to encapsulate Dewey's work, John McDermott writes that the philosopher "believed that ordinary experience is seeded with possibilities for surprises and possibilities for enhancement if we but allow it to bathe over us in its own terms."⁷ Ralston does an excellent job springing some of those surprises by taking the reader through actual, imagined, and projected debates involving Dewey. In so doing, he reveals how Deweyan engagement fosters an enhanced understanding of both past and contemporary issues. It is also a "call for Deweyan pragmatists to engage in historical inquiry. . . . To step back as a way of moving forward, to embrace a more nostalgic from of pragmatism"⁸. The generative Dewey presented here is an excellent introduction to Dewey's political and pedagogical theory as well as to how that theory emerges from and returns to concrete social reality.

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1. Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 160.
2. Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do—The Limits of Artificial Intelligence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979), 277.
3. (MW 4:142, cited in Ralston, 99).
4. Paul Stob, "Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, and the Pursuit of the Public," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38, No. 3 (2005), 228.
5. F. Thomas Burke, D. Micah Hester, and Robert B. Talisse, *Dewey's Logical Theory: New Studies and Interpretations* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

6. (MW 12:80, cited in Ralston, 5).
7. John J. McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, originally published 1973), x.
8. (12-13).

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